

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**Bringing Together Islam and Western Culture:  
From Personal Experience of a German Muslim  
To Interaction of the Islamic and the Western World**

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Greetings

It is a great privilege and a pleasure for me to be here tonight and in sha'Allah I shall be able to make a small contribution in a line of great events which His Excellency, ambassador Al-Orabi, on one hand and The Muslim Women's Group Berlin on the other hand have hosted in this house during the past years. I would like to thank to thank Madame Amal Al-Orabi because she had the idea for this occasion, I would like to thank the President of the Muslim Women's Group, Madame Layla Sater, for turning this idea into an invitation, and of course I would like to thank His Excellency for making this an official embassy function and for generously donating this wonderful room.

This embassy has turned into a show case not only for initiatives, which take place in Egypt, but also initiatives in which the Arab Republic of Egypt and my country, the Federal Republic of Germany, cooperate together. Please allow me to mention just some very few:

H. E. President Mubarak made the proposal for an international conference of dialogue and interaction.

H. E. Madame Dr. h. c. Suzanne Mubarak received the Medal of Honour of the Free University in Berlin and in a brilliant speech outlined her initiatives (and I might say her great achievements) for education and literacy in Egypt.

H. E. Minister Hamdi Zakzouk gave a brilliant speech in the summer of 2002 in Germany about "Islam and Europe – No Future Without Dialogue" in which he said: "Especially the dialogue between Islam and Europe is necessary. For this Europe needs much more knowledge about Islam and the Muslims need more thorough knowledge about European culture and history."

In Cairo the Federal Republic of Germany recently opened a German university.

And finally in Cairo there is every year the "General Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs" which I had the honour to attend several times: The results of last year's conference are part of my lecture today.

When one sets out to speak about “personal experience” the temptation is great to tell little personal stories, surf through anecdotal notes, try to create for your listeners a pleasant evening, enjoyable but also highly forgettable. I think after a long day of work we may feel that we have earned a break, but I also think that in these times and at this moment in world history the situation is not as peaceful that we might just forget it all and have a party.

Therefore forgive me, if I try to be a little more serious tonight. Yes, what I shall say tonight is based on personal experience, but I shall try to put it into a certain framework, relate it to the pattern of the discourse in which the Western and the Islamic world have been engaged during the past 1400 years and are struggling in right now.

Let me give you a short survey about the topics I would like to speak about:

- The patterns of the relationship between the Islamic and the Western world
- The patterns of behaviour of Muslims and Non-Muslims as a basis for interaction and
- The basic principles of Islam and democracy as the foundation of a global order.

## **The pattern of relationship between the Islamic and the Western world**

Public opinion: We have learnt in our history books and we read and hear about this every day in the media that the underlying pattern of relations between the Islamic and the Western world are confrontational and antagonistic. Human beings in both worlds have been taught and are being taught right now that they are each others' enemies.

If I confront this with my personal experience as somebody who - at the age of 41 years – has said the shahada, in other words embraced Islam, I face an interesting question: Does that mean that as a man who was raised in the West and has been educated to be a democrat I am all of a sudden at war with myself and the society I live in? Well the answer comes in two parts: I can assure you all I felt when I said the shahada was the feeling of being at peace with God and with my self. However as far as my relations vis à vis the German society were concerned there was indeed a different story. Some fellow citizens of mine had another opinion and I had my share of threats, because these people considered me a traitor to the German people.

An experience like this makes one wonder, and I soon asked myself what is, beyond my personal experience, in a more general way the pattern of relationship between the Muslim and the Western world.

If we look at history with an open mind we can see that there have been different patterns of relationships: The confrontational pattern is not the only one: There are patterns of cooperation and interaction. There has not only been war, but also cultural and economic interaction. And what is most important, even the old war stories are being rewritten now. Let me just share some few precious items from the book "Europe and Islam: History of a Misunderstanding", by Italian professor Franco Cardini:

There we find many stories that show that the confrontation between Europe and Islam did not happen in the way we have been told. Some short examples:

1) In Al-Andalus Muslim and Christian rulers did not only fight against each other along the lines of their religion, but they also made alliances across the religious divide if they thought they could benefit from it, so Muslim-Christian coalitions fought other Christian-Muslim coalitions.

2) The rulers of the port towns in Italy and generals from the Ottoman Empire also fought in different coalitions disregarding faith if it served their purposes.

3) Cardini even mentions that the “Song of Roland”, one of the icons of Western culture is based on a falsification of the facts: That it was not Muslims that fought the retreating army, but non-Muslim mountaineers.

So let me come to my first conclusion of this evening: I think we can say, indeed we have to admit and pronounce that history is not simply black and white, instead we have to look carefully what really happened – and rewrite our history books.

I think it is no longer correct to see the Mediterranean as the sea that separates the Islamic world, the Orient, and the Western world, Europe, the Occident. It is rather the sea in the middle, as its name appropriately says, which brings us together. Islamic and Western culture cannot any longer be treated separately or in an adverse way: They really are two strings of a “Mediterranean Double Helix”.

## **The patterns of behaviour of Muslims and Non-Muslims as a basis for interaction**

Public opinion: When Muslims look at the West and Western people look at the Islamic world they often come to the following conclusion: Muslims consider the Western world materialistic and hedonistic, without any spiritual guidance. In their view people of the West do whatever they like, in their personal lives as well as in society and politics. Many Muslims think that the so called rule of the majority is basically executed in the name of economic interest. On the other hand, Western people consider the Islamic world as backward, medieval, lacking enlightenment, human rights and democracy.

Looking at myself and looking at my personal experience I once again came to the conclusion, as I did when looking at history, that this cannot be right: As a Westerner raised in a Christian home I have never considered myself as decadent and as a Muslim brought up as a democrat I have never felt backward.

However living among two different groups of people I have found out that there are indeed different patterns of behaviour among Muslims and among people of the Western world, based on their holy texts and the history of the past 2003 respectively 1424 years. If we really want to interact, we have to know about these differences. And I would like to share with you some thoughts about this.

To start with I would like to point out what are for me the basic differences between the Western and the Islamic world.

- The history of the Western world is a history of rebellion.
- The history of the Islamic world is a history of submission.
  
- The culture of the West is a culture of disintegration.
- The culture of Islam is a culture of integration.

### Western Civilization: foundations and activities

Let us begin with some information about the history of the West: The message of Christianity, on which Western civilization was based, says: Man is born guilty, he is burdened with "original sin", i.e. the sins of his forefathers, because of this he is inherently bad, guidance alone cannot help him, he needs redemption. To show His love with humanity, God sent His "son", Jesus Christ, into the world, who by dying on the cross, took the sins of mankind onto him and opened the door for redemption.

However in Christianity people seemed not to be happy with this message, instead they always rebelled

- People rebelled in the name of emancipation against the religious message - maybe only subconsciously – because why should man, being part of God's creation, be burdened by something like original sin?
- People rebelled against the thought that they could not be as powerful and wise as God. One of the fundamental myths of European culture is Dr. Faustus, who even made a contract with the devil to gain knowledge.
- People rebelled against a body of religious clergy who developed, defined the religion.
- People rebelled in the name of liberation against their superiors: princes, kings and emperors. These ruled the Christians, but not as people equal before God, based on rules given by God to everyone on earth, but as leaders who claimed their power was bestowed on them by God.

Looking for a model to set things right, people in the West looked back into history to pre-Christian times and discovered that in old Greece people discussed on the forum and then came to a decision. This procedure was called democracy, government of the people. (At this time of course only a small group of privileged men.)

With the American Declaration of Independence, people in the West brought together their understanding of religion and their visions of government and stated with regards to their religious beliefs, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;..."

And with regards to the way they would organise their affairs they continued: "...that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, (laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness...)"

As far as development of society and science are concerned it is not by accident that the division of labour has been invented in the West. In the past centuries it has been the basic principle of the West to separate and divide, in other words to disintegrate:

- religion was separated from politics (maybe not in reality, but at least in the understanding of the people)

- things were broken up into molecules and atoms and atoms were split
- human beings, fauna and flora were reduced to genes and now we practise genetic engineering
- in society, families were disintegrated, parents separated from children, man from women (in Germany one third of the households are single households)
- but there was also the separation of powers for the benefit of the people.

### The Islamic World: Foundations and actions

In the Islamic world there is only one message, and this message was given to humankind by God. The message of Islam says: man is born with a clean slate. He has the potential to live a life according to the will of God, if he follows God's guidance, which was sent to mankind through a succession of prophets and the final revelation of the Qur'an. Of course man also has the potential be a sinner, who at the end of time will have to face God, take up responsibility for his deeds, but man also can hope for the mercy of Allah God.

The message of Islam also says: all Muslims are equal: men and women, white and black, Muslims are being taught that the difference of the people is a sign of God - a message that leaves no room for racism.

And finally the message of Islam says that everybody is bound to the same rules, caliphs and emperors in the same way as the individual Muslim. Indeed the first constitutionalism in the world was the Islamic community.

With this Divine message as a foundation is it really astonishing that Muslims did not rebel against the message of God, that the key word of their behaviour is not rebellion, but submission? Is it not the most natural thing on earth to submit to the will of a beneficent and merciful God, who sets you free to act according to His rules, unburdened by an original sin? Is it not natural not to make a revolution if the message you have received from God is in itself revolutionary?

Is it really so difficult to understand that Muslims follow God's rules in their private lives, but also in society and in government? That they live an integrated way of life?

However we have to understand that there is a serious shortcoming as far as civil society and governments are concerned: It what may be wonderful for family life, that generations do not get separated, that family life is integrated. But this "integration" may not be beneficial in public life as far as governments are concerned: governments do need control, there needs to be a

separation of powers and there need to be institutions of government, which in the Islamic world never have been developed. Most important of all: Muslims need rules on how to abolish governments, because killing the khalifa is not a solution (and we know that Muslim rules can be quite cruel). And here I think Muslims by interaction with the Western civilization can actually learn something for their own benefit, by rethinking they way they govern themselves.

As for science, an analytical mind is the prerequisite for any successful research. Looking at history we cannot deny the fact that Muslims for centuries were on the forefront of scientific research. Following a saying to search for knowledge, even if it meant going to China, their inquisitive minds researched in medicine, geography, mathematics and came to astonishing results. Looking at history we also cannot deny that fact, that after a certain time, Muslims submitted more to imitation than to a creative approach to their religion, that they stopped looking and closed their eyes in science.

So in this chapter again let me come from personal interest to a general conclusion: There are different patterns of behaviour of Muslims and Non-Muslims.

But it would be wrong to interpret these differences as something that separates us. Instead knowing about the differences is a prerequisite that we can learn from each other. As it is said in the Qur'an:

“Among His other signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for all mankind.” (30: 22)

“Men, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in God's sight is he who is most righteous. God is all knowing and wise.” (49: 13)

## **The basic principles of Islam and democracy as the foundation of a global order**

Public opinion: People in the West are of the opinion that there is no democracy in the Islamic world, and they take this as a proof that Islam is not compatible with and Muslims are not capable of democracy. They may not know or they may want to ignore the fact that for example in Indonesia, which is the country with the largest population of Muslims on earth, people have changed their government by public elections and not by military coup. The same happened and happens in other countries from Bangla Desh to Algeria. And we of course have elections in many other Islamic countries.

And, yes, on the other side there are Muslims who think that democracy and Islam do not go together, that democracy is haram and anti Islamic.

Here once again based on my personal experience I had to ask himself, is being a Muslim and living as a democrat incompatible or does this go together? For myself there never was a doubt that these two go together and I never had the feeling that I had to engage in some spiritual balancing act. However the hostility I encountered from both sides made me look once again for some basic patterns or a basic principle which helps to explain that Islam and democracy are compatible:

As a Muslim I know that I am responsible for anything I do during my life on earth. On judgement day I must face God and accept this responsibility towards Him. As it is said in the Qur'an:

„Every man is a pledge for that which he hath earned” (52:21)

“That no laden one shall bear another’s load. And that man hath only that for which he maketh an effort, and that his effort will be seen, and afterwards he will be repaid fore it with fullest payment.” (53:38-41)

As a human being who does something for others in society or politics, having been appointed or elected, I am responsible for everything I am doing for or in the name of others, and at the end of the term or election day I must give account of what I have done.

So in religion, society and politics there is this one principle: every human being is responsibility for everything he or she does. (And this principle by the way is the founding principle for the

German Constitution the first words of which say: “In the responsibility before God and mankind...”)

Now you might say this may be o.k. for the lecturer, who has come up with a solution that fits his personal conditions best. Well, in coming to the end of what I have to say I would like to share another experience with you: I have found out that I am not alone thinking that Islam and democracy are very well compatible. Let me just quickly go through three important texts which have been published recently, concerning this matter.

Dr. Taha Jaber al-Alwani, Chairman of the “North American *Fiqh* Council” und President of the “Graduate School of Social and Islamic Sciences” and one of the greatest scholars of Islam in our times, writes:

“First, it is the duty of American Muslims to participate constructively in the political process, if only to protect their rights, and give support to views and causes they favour. Their participation may also improve the quality of information disseminated about Islam. We call this participation a “duty” because we do not consider it merely a “right” that can be abandoned or a “permission” which can be ignored. It falls into the category of safeguarding of necessities and ensuring the betterment of the Muslim community in this country.”

“*Fatwa* Concerning The Participation of Muslims in the American Political Process”  
([www.amconline.org/newamc/imam/fatwa.shtml](http://www.amconline.org/newamc/imam/fatwa.shtml))

In the „Islamic Charta“ which was published by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany in February 2002 we can find a clear declaration in favour of democracy with the following words:

„Whether German citizens or not, the Muslims represented by the Central Council (ZMD) accept the basic legal order of the Federal Republic of Germany as guaranteed by its Constitution, providing for the rule of law, division of power, and democracy, including a multi-party system, universal suffrage and eligibility, and freedom of religion....“

(Islamic Charta, Fundamental Declaration of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) on the relationship between Muslims, their State and their Society, Berlin, February 2002)

Now you could say these are only texts, which concern the behaviour of Muslims living in a Non-Muslim environment. Well, let me surprise you. There is one text which was passed in Cairo in May 2003 in the form of a resolution by the participants of the conference „The Future of Islamic Nation“, which was organised by the “Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs”:

“Recommendations

...Third: The Political Theme

...

3. The Islamic Shura system incorporates the most appropriate forms of democracy. Hence the Conference calls upon Islamic countries to adhere to true democratic norms, particularly: impartial elections, to promote the multi-party system and eliminate any obstacles before it, and to provide a suitable environment for rotation of power.”

(Additionally accepted by the plenary but at the end of the conference not yet included into the official text: Independence of judiciary system and securing human rights.)

Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Al-Awqaf, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Conference: The Future of Islamic Nation, 9–12. May 2003 G

Let me add for the benefit of the Non-Muslims in the audience the references to shura as they are written in the Qur’an:

„...who obey their Lord, attend to their prayers, and conduct their affairs by mutual consent: who bestow in alms part of what We have given them and, when oppressed, seek to redress their wrongs.“ (42:38)

„...Take counsel with them in the conduct of affairs.“ (3:159)

This having been said, I would like come to the following and final conclusion:

First: True interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims will only be possible, if each side knows, understands and accepts the history, the spiritual and theoretical foundations of the other side.

Second: So far I have spoken of two worlds: The Islamic and the Western world: As a starting point for the development of strategies of interaction we should ask ourselves if today we really still can speak about the Islamic world on one side and a Western world on the other. I think instead we have to recognize that the Islamic world is split into over fifty nations in the modern understanding of the word where Muslims are in the majority. Western civilization is organised likewise in many nations in which for example the separation of religion and politics has found many different ways of expression. Furthermore, in the age of migration, many Muslims live in the West and a lot of people from the West live in the Islamic world.

From this I come to agree with the recommendation of Taha Jaber al Alwani, who recommends that we should give up the medieval tradition of speaking of “dar ul Islam” and “dar ul harb”, because it is outdated. Both worlds have come together in One World.

I think that it is wrong if one side focuses on its problems and the other on theirs and both sides blame the other one for these problems. The better way is to learn from each other.

In this regard it is indeed encouraging that there are many people in the West who understand that there is no peace in society if we do not accept our basic values and that an ethical conduct is a better foundation than economic greed.

And it is encouraging that Muslims have once again opened their minds, declared the doors of Ijtihad open again, are trying to develop a Fiqh for Minorities, and have opened their hearts and minds towards democracy.

We have to accept that the problems of this one world are indeed “our” problems. And we must work out solutions together.

Let me name some of these problems:

- We are facing the evil consequences of financial globalisation.
- We are wasting our resources, instead of focussing on a way of living that conserves energy and does not waste it.
- Everybody tries to get richer and richer, not enough are concerned with sharing wealth.
- Everybody tries to become more and more powerful, instead of starting to share power.

These problems may look insurmountable, but I think with the help of God we shall be able to initiate some change towards living together in peace.